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Staff Writer

First Cover

Frank Burns pens history of Davidson

Frank Burns, who for years wrote a weekly column about Tennessee books for *The Tennessean*, has written a new history Davidson County.

Thus, he becomes the first to write histories of two counties (Wilson County earlier) in the series of books about each of the 95 counties in Tennessee being published by Memphis State University Press.

First in the series was Anderson County, published in 1962, and *Davidson County* is the 18th. As center of state government and home of three Presidents, Davidson presented special problems, and Burns decided to try to confine his 125-page book to county affairs — cutting out state and national events that centered here such as the nation's final fight for women's right to vote and Nashville's pivotal role in the Civil War.

But Burns collects anecdotes to highlight history, and he dug into little-known facts, sometimes about neglected figures in local history, to show that our heroes were not without bitter opposition.

From the time James Robertson and 255 other early settlers came together from their forts to sign the Cumberland Compact in 1780 for establishment of a government, there were sometimes disagreements that led to lawsuits. The 12 "Notables" who were selected to govern the community were remarkable in themselves, and Burns says he likes all of them.

Burns includes a charming scene that helps explain why Phillip Lindsley left a brilliant career at Princeton University to become head of the struggling University of Nashville. The story opens a generation earlier, during the Revolutionary War, when Nathaniel Lawrence, a student at Princeton, was "leaning on a fence' on the campus, as "the North Carolina regiment of the Continental Line came marching past."

Lawrence stepped forward and "joined for the duration," soon became an officer and after the war became a founding member of the prestigious Society of the Cincinnati. Not only that — as reward for his military service, he received from North Carolina a grant of 5,120 acres in Tennessee. His daughter married Lindsley, and Burns says it was because of that Tennessee connection that Lindsley chose to come here as head of the University of Nashville.

Davidson has been fun to write about, Burns says, partly because, as capital city, it has attracted a wide assortment of colorful characters and partly because there are always more discoveries to be made here. Sam Houston, for instance, has had volumes written about him, but it was Burns who discovered records of a controversy between Houston and other members of the Masonic order in Nashville in 1825.

Houston, a hot-headed young congressman running for re-election, heard a speech by a fellow Mason, Gen. George W. Gibbs, in which he made "slanderous" remarks about John Eaton, "close friend of Houston and Senator Andrew Jackson."

"I know that rumor has a thousand tongues, and five hundred are slanderous," Houston said as he petitioned the politically powerful Grand Lodge to settle the matter. Gibbs had denied making the statement, and Houston felt that his own credibility was being attacked. The Grand Lodge decided that Houston had "acted correctly and honorably throughout the whole transaction."

Burns states that "Accuracy of idea has been my aim," but mistakes sometimes escape the most vigilant eyes. Tarbox School, he writes, was "demolished in the 1960s." Actually the 103-year-old building still stands (with a new front) at 1801 Broadway, used as Knowles Center for Senior Citizens.

But almost without error, Burns races from "Mr. Robertson's County" in 1783 to "Metroland — John Seigenthaler's Town" in 1962, the year that Nashville and Davidson County were combined into one unit. Burns argues that Seigenthaler, through his work as editor of *The Tennessean*, had a strong hand in leading city and county to join forces.

"For the next 20 years, Nashville would be John Seigenthaler's town," Burns writes. "The history of Davidson County ends in 1962. Now it is the story of Metroland." ■

Frank Burns will autograph copies of his book today from 1:30-3 p.m. at Mills Bookstore in Belle Meade Plaz and at 2 p.m. Tuesday at Elder's Bookstore on Elliston Place.